

**Melanne Verveer**

**“Invest for the Future: Women Driving Economic Growth” Conference**

**Zagreb, Croatia**

Let me begin by saying what a personal pleasure it is to be in Zagreb, one of the world's most historic and beautiful cities.

I am so pleased that we in the U.S. State Department could partner with the embassy here and the Zagreb School of Economics and Management on this conference. I want to especially thank Đuro Njavro, the Dean of ZSEM. It is so wonderful that you are working here in Croatia to increase the number of women entrepreneurs and to strengthen women in business and society. We are very excited to build off of the conference in Istanbul back in January. A very special welcome to each and every one of you, particularly the extraordinary women entrepreneurs from Croatia, Kosovo, Albania, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovinian and Greece. We are thrilled that you've come together. You represent a truly vital force for driving economic growth and progress in their region. Women who are successful in business are also empowered to be leaders in their communities and countries.

As your businesses grow, we are confident you will speak out against corruption when you see it. As your businesses grow, we know you will be voices for a

climate that fosters innovation and prosperity. As your businesses grow, you will advocate with your leaders for a system that promotes greater communication and trade. As leaders in business, we know you will also work to strengthen democratic institutions and civil society. And working together, you will not only benefit your businesses and grow your economies, but also strengthen cross-border relationships, even between nations dealing with conflict.

I must also acknowledge Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor of Croatia. Your example of strong leadership is surely a testament to what women all around the world are capable of. All of you here are men and women who possess a reservoir of talent and experience in finance, technology, management and so many other areas who have come together to share best practices and to make this what we hope will truly be an Investment for the Future.

I also want to thank the members of the U.S. embassies and consulates who are here, and particularly Ambassador Foley and his staff here in Zagreb who have done so much to bring us to this day. Our embassies were not only instrumental in selecting all of you participants gathered here today, but they will continue to work with you when you leave here, through follow on training, through online conversations, through meetings in your country and the region. With Invest for the Future, we are just beginning our journey.

If we build a network of women leaders in business that spans this region, there will be no stopping you and no stopping progress for this region. We know that empowering women is one of the most effective and positive forces for reshaping the globe. It is a simple fact that no country can get ahead if it leaves half its people behind.

Today there are many converging studies--from the World Bank to the World Economic Forum (WEF), from think tanks, universities, and corporations--that show that investing in women is a high yield investment. The World Economic Forum annually produces a gender gap report. You might ask - why does a forum comprised of top leaders in business and other fields focus on the gender gap in countries?

The WEF report compares equality between men and women in a given country on four key measurements: educational attainment, health and survivability, economic opportunity, and political empowerment. In those countries where the gap is closer to being closed, those countries experience greater productivity and economic competitiveness. Gender equality is key to a country's progress because it yields higher growth outcomes and lower poverty.

Women entrepreneurs offer people everywhere so much promise. It is a fact that small and medium-sized enterprises (SME's) drive economic growth and create jobs. This is true in my country and it is true around the world. And, women-

owned enterprises often have a better growth rate and a better loan payback rate.

That's why one CEO remarked, "If you want to drive GDP, the best investment, the lowest hanging fruit to pick, are women-run SME's.

We see this in the work of business women here like Ketil from Albania, who runs a thriving business that she began only a year out of the Shkodra Economic School. Not only is her business doing well, introducing Made in Albania products to new marketplaces, but it is also doing good – employing disadvantaged women in her hometown that is combating high unemployment. She is a true entrepreneur and a pillar of her community.

She reminds me of Sanija from Kosovo. Sanija is the Executive Director and a founder of an NGO called "Lady", which was established to support women by providing better employment opportunities. During 2010 it facilitated the employment of 70 Kosovo women and has made a tremendous impact on their lives.

And Vaska from Macedonia is already exemplifying the key elements of this conference: persistence, hard work as an entrepreneur, and networking. Her winery has added modern technology to a family tradition and now employs twenty people. Her wine has earned certificates and medals for their outstanding quality and she should be saluted for her success.

But as many of you know, and as these women would also readily acknowledge, women's success is often hindered by barriers that often undermine their ability to start or to expand their business. Barriers like lack of access to markets, to training, mentors, and technology. Women often confront corruption, discriminatory regulations or practices like lack of property rights. And, of course, it's also difficult to balance the responsibilities of family and work.

Access to finance repeatedly comes up as the major challenge to women for business growth. This significant gender gap to finance is painfully acute as it affects what we might call "the missing middle" of the small enterprise sector, which is mostly women-run and has the best growth and jobs creation potential. That's why my government is working to help women overcome obstacles to greater economic participation. We are hoping that through this conference and the follow-on activities, we will better help you to overcome such barriers.

Women's economic participation is critical to emerging markets and many of you represent those emerging markets. The vitality of your markets will depend to a large degree on successful businesswomen like yourselves. Women's work also provides a multiplier effect because women invest upwards of 90 percent of their income in their families and communities on health, education, and other investments for the betterment of society.

Each of you is helping to chart a path to a better tomorrow for yourselves and your families, your communities, and your countries. And in so doing you are also role models for young women who want to start their own business or move ahead in their careers. As part of Invest for the Future, we hope you will also share your wisdom and experiences with young women in your own countries, that you will pay this experience forward to benefit others.

I hope you have a productive and rewarding experience over course of this conference, and in the months to come as we work together to Invest for the Future. When women progress, everyone benefits: men and women, boys and girls.

Thank you very much.